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Do schools really need computers?

■A debate hosted by the AS220 arts center in Providence indicates that there is more than one way to look at educational technology.

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PROVIDENCE -- Prevailing wisdom has it that the rush to fill school classrooms with computers is a good thing.

According to this view, computers prepare students for the high-tech jobs of the information age, broaden their horizons by linking them to children around the world via the Internet, and open for even the poorest a pipeline to the kinds of information once the preserve of the country's premier research libraries.

The view is a popular one and counts among its adherents President Clinton, who has pledged to build ``a bridge to the 21st century . . . where computers are as much a part of the classroom as blackboards."

But there is another perspective:

Computers sap students' imaginations, shorten attention spans, cripple social skills and cost so much that some school districts are sacrificing arts and music programs just to keep up with the high-tech juggernaut sweeping classrooms across the country.

These competing views flared at a fiery panel discussion last week at the AS220 arts center.

The discussion, titled ``Does `Intel Inside' our classrooms mean that soul, value and community aren't?``, pitted a modern-day Luddite who swore he will never own ``one of those Pandora's boxes" against a school superintendent and an award-winning school librarian who argued that computers have made tremendous contributions to the classroom.

The discussion last Tuesday, the third in AS220's five-part ``Action Speaks" series, comes at a fitting time. Grant money for schools that want to buy computers is exploding, as are freebies from technology companies seeking to build relationships with school districts.

But as the keyboard replaces the slide rule on desks of students across the country, some critics say there is little hard evidence that computers are actually raising student achievement and may even be doing harm.

A recent article in Atlantic Monthly magazine cites a poll last year in which U.S. teachers ranked computer skills and media technology as more ``essential" than the study of European history, biology, chemistry and physics.

And already there are examples of school districts across the country cutting music programs and closing art rooms to make way for new computer equipment. Fulfilling Mr. Clinton's vision of a computer in every classroom, the article says, could cost \$40 billion to \$100 billion over the next five years.

Panelist Kirkpatrick Sale, a contributing editor at The Nation magazine and member of the anti-technology Lead Pencil Society, insisted that there is no scientific proof that computers are improving students' minds. In fact, he said, they may even be damaging them.

``The kind of information we get on a computer is very narrow and limited," said Sale. ``You're bringing in that TV culture of speed

and ease and flash and glitz."

Sale is the author of *Rebels Against the Future*, a history of the bands of British workers in the early 1800s, called Luddites, who rioted against the new machines they felt were replacing them.

"Computers don't develop the right-brain way of knowing the world," he said Tuesday. "It doesn't provide the dream and dance and song and poetry ways of knowing the world, which are necessary for a well-rounded person."

He described computers as a "techno-fix" that draws attention away from the real scourges afflicting schools, such as low test scores, outdated textbooks, drugs and violence.

But the other two panelists disagreed. They said that computers were simply tools that, much like calculators, can help students learn in new ways while cutting back on needless grunt work.

"We do ourselves an injustice to say that just because it has the potential for excesses, we can't control it," said Isa Kaftal Zimmerman, superintendent of schools of the Acton-Boxborough (Mass.) Regional School District.

"To not give students the opportunity to learn in quick and extremely expansive ways is to deny them what society and modern technology has made possible."

MaryKay Schnare, the librarian at Nathan Bishop Middle School and the 1996 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year, dismissed the idea that computers would somehow strip students of imagination and thoughtfulness.

"Love, friendship and beauty were here before computers and will be here after," said Schnare, one of 150 educators across the country to win the prestigious Milken award this year for teaching excellence. "The things that make us human have not been

changed by computers."

Sale raised the specter of computers some day making school buildings and teachers obsolete. Children would go to class from their computers at home, leaving them increasingly vulnerable to what he suggested was unfiltered corporate propaganda already infiltrating classrooms through TV programs such as Channel One.

But Schnare criticized as unrealistic Sale's vision of an Orwellian future of "virtual schools."

She said that while there are more computers in the schools, the printed word is still king. Nathan Bishop, she said, has 100 computers, but 10,000 books and 50 magazine subscriptions.

"We're trying to balance things," she said. "I'm not advocating computers as the religion for the new millennium. I'm saying it can be used as a tool, a servant -- my servant."

But at one point in the evening she drew exclamations of surprise from the audience when she said she couldn't comment on corporate relationships with schools because Nathan Bishop had a "partnership" with Microsoft.

(Microsoft decided two years ago to use the school as a test site for its CD-ROM encyclopedia Encarta and has been sending the school free copies of the software. It has also provided the operating system Windows 95.)

The 60 people who crowded into AS220 last Tuesday included several teachers, who were split on whether computers were helping their students learn.

"I feel a tremendous pressure to be computer-literate when my interests lie elsewhere," one teacher told the panelists. "I'm fearful that what we're doing with computers with our kids is stifling their imagination."

Another teacher, who would not give his name, begged to differ.

“I can take my children on journeys around the globe that they'd never taken before,” he said. “Students are engrossed by the computer, and it's a thrill to see it happening.”

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